

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Current Intelligence
23 January 1963

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Situation in Laos

1. Since its formation last June, Souvanna Phouma's coalition government has amounted to little more than an uneasy and pro forma association of the opposing Laotian factions. Despite some agreements in principle in Vientiane there has been no real progress toward civil or military integration in the provinces. The country essentially remains in a state of de facto partition, roughly along the lines existing at the time hostilities formally ended.

2. The situation probably will continue to simmer much along present lines until maneuvering by the principal antagonists alters the existing framework of power relationships. Souvanna, Phoumi, and Souphannouvong are each scheming to turn time to his own advantage. None of these

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leaders appears to desire a deliberate breakup of the coalition at this stage. While there exists within the Pathet Lao a faction which inclines toward more militant action, prevailing bloc strategy apparently continues to eschew a deliberate resumption of hostilities in favor of boring from within politically.

3. North Vietnam, the principal bloc action agent in Laos seems content with the existing state of affairs. This enables Hanoi continued use of the eastern Laotian corridor to support ^{the} Viet Cong effort in South Vietnam. The Communists seem determined to frustrate any action by the International Control Commission which might threaten their interests. [REDACTED]

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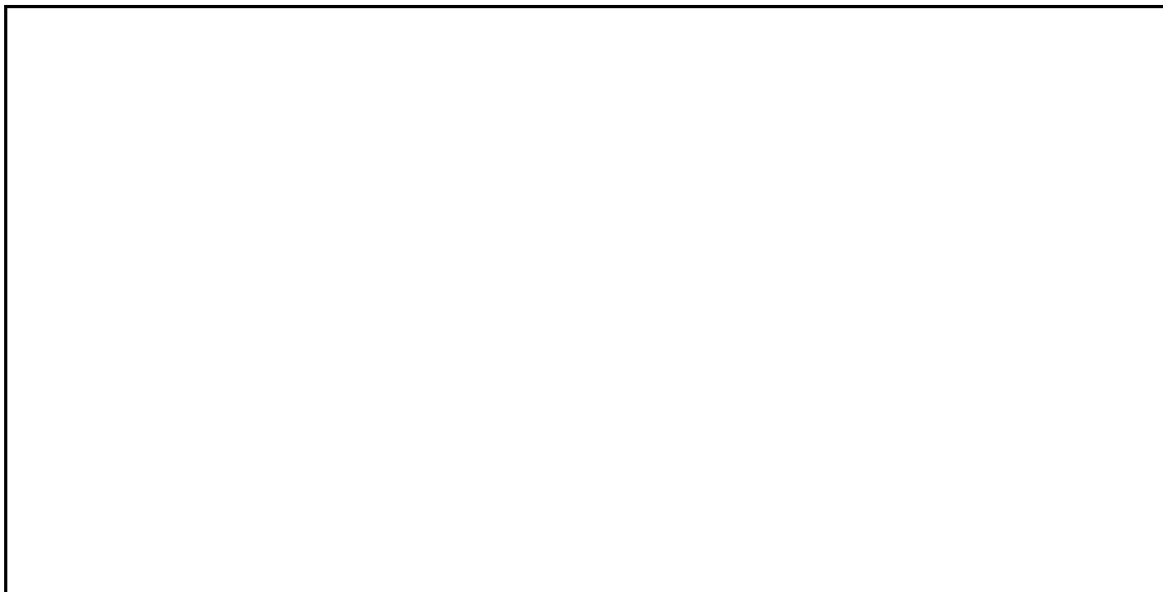
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[REDACTED] Estimates of present Vietnamese Communist strength in Laos range from 2000 to 5000. A major difficulty in estimating their current strength is that they have largely been diffused as cadre and advisers among Pathet Lao units.

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5. The military situation generally has been quiescent for many months. Action largely consists of cautious probing by opposing forces with only sporadic minor incidents occurring. The Pathet Lao, for the time being at least, appear to have abandoned their relatively futile efforts to mop up Meo forces entrenched in the northeastern and central provinces. Instead the Communists are trying to starve out these pockets by action against Air America supply aircraft and by political pressure to bring all such aircraft under direct control of the coalition government where they could exercise a veto. The transfer of 10 Soviet aircraft to the Vientiane government last December is being cited as a model by the Communists. While it is true that bloc airlift operations as such ended in late October, the quantitatively much more important



flow of military supplies for the Pathet Lao by road from North Vietnam has continued unabated.

6. While General Phoumi has made a pretense at demobilization, he has actually done little more than pare the FAR down a few thousand by disbanding some of his irregular units. While no longer Defense Minister, Phoumi retains effective control of the FAR and apparently continues to enjoy the loyalty of the officer corps. The numbers of the opposing forces have remained fairly constant. Present estimates are: FAR - 60,000, including 10,000 auto-defense; Meo/Kha - 19,900; Kong Le - 8,500, including 2,500 in the badly factionalized Phong Saly command; and Pathet Lao - 19,500.

7. The most important development in the Laotian situation has been the slowly widening cleavage between Kong Le's neutralist forces and the Pathet Lao. This trend has resulted from heavy-handed Pathet Lao efforts over the past seven months to expand their areas of military and political influence at the expense of the neutralists as well as of the FAR. Pathet Lao intimidation and propaganda has to a certain extent eroded the unity and effectiveness of Kong Le's forces. However, the downing of the American supply plane over the Plaine des Jarres

on 27 November by suborned neutralist elements seems to have shocked Kong Le. Since then he has tightened his authority and redeployed his forces in the Plaine des Jarres along lines best suited to defend against Pathet Lao attack. Kong Le says that his forces unassisted could hold out only a week against the Pathet Lao. However, tentative plans for drawing on FAR and Meo support are going forward on both sides. Phoumi, in addition to working closely with Souvanna at the cabinet level, is spinning a delicate web in hope of bringing Kong Le back to the fold. Through this approach, Phoumi aspires ultimately to reacquire control over the vital Plaine des Jarres.

18. The Pathet Lao are aware of these trends, and are seeking to forestall effective cooperation among Phoumi, Souvanna and Kong Le. If and when the Pathet Lao estimate that the combination of political and military forces arrayed against them has become sufficiently strong to jeopardize their position, then they would be likely to give up the political game and revert to direct military pressure to attain their long range goal of national power.